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ABSTRACT

This is the second of 12 research reports on the phenomenon of language instruction within a large class environment. The report is written in five sections. The second section (following the introductory first section) discusses the reasons for studying large classes in language instruction, including the facts that teachers find large classes cause difficulties that affect teaching performance, that large classes are becoming commonplace, and that very little has been done to address the problem or train English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) teachers to instruct under such difficult circumstances. The third section outlines and explains the project's activities, namely, creating a bibliography, networking, organizing colloquia, and promoting and undertaking research. Section 4 presents the nine specific questions that the project is attempting to study. These include the following: the teacher's concerns, the extent of the large class phenomenon, the reasons for the occurrence of large classes, attitudes towards large classes, data collection in large classes, the performance of large classes, strategies in large classes, language acquisition in large classes, and experiments in large classes. Section 5 summarizes and presents conclusions.
(GLR)

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LANCASTER - LEEDS
LANGUAGE LEARNING IN LARGE CLASSES
RESEARCH PROJECT

THE STUDY OF LARGE CLASSES

HYWEL COLEMAN

PROJECT REPORT NO. 2

Hywel Coleman
The Study of Large Classes.

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Research Project

Project Report No. 2

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Please see the last two pages of this report for details of other publications in the Project Report series, and for ordering information.

1 Introduction ''

The Lancaster-Leeds Language Learning in Large Classes Research Project was founded at the beginning of 1987, originally as a subdivision of Dick Allwright's Classroom Language Learning Research Group. Since October 1987 the Research Project has functioned independently of the CLLRG. It is jointly coordinated by Dick Allwright in Lancaster and Hywel Coleman in Leeds.

This paper begins by considering the arguments for investigating the phenomenon of large classes. In Section 3, it moves on to discuss the main activities of the Research Project. Section 4 presents the specific questions which the Project is attempting to study. Section 5 is a summary and conclusion.

2 Justifications For Studying Large Classes

Why concern oneself with large classes? The Research Project had five reasons for wanting to pay attention to the phenomenon. There may well be other reasons for investigating it as well.

The decision to investigate the question of large classes sprang originally from the personal experience of some members of the Group. In my own work in Indonesia, for example, I had been involved with a group of young ELT lecturers who faced a variety

of problems : lack of training, less than perfect mastery of the language they were supposed to be teaching, lack of self-confidence, no facilities such as books or equipment, poorly motivated students, little feeling of being appreciated by the institutions for which they were working, and very difficult classroom environments. Much of this the lecturers took for granted. Other aspects of the situation they found unpleasant but tolerated without too many complaints. But the one problem about which they did all complain was that of large classes. At that time, classes were approximately 200 strong. Unofficially, and on their own initiative, lecturers divided their huge classes into two groups and either taught the two groups themselves on different occasions or 'gave' one of the groups to a colleague (together with half of the honorarium which they were paid). In practice, then, classes had approximately 100 students each. The significance of this anecdote is twofold : firstly, that in certain situations very large classes may be a common phenomenon, and, secondly, that teachers who are working in extremely difficult circumstances may identify large classes as one of their major problems.

Other members of the group had had similar experiences, and almost everyone had at least anecdotal evidence of the occurrence of large classes in other parts of the world. We heard stories of large classes in Egypt, Brazil, Mexico and India. Our interest was aroused because in each case there was a feeling that the teachers who have to face large classes perceive them to

be a severe problem. Apparently, lack of textbooks or intermittent electricity, difficult though these problems are, were somehow less urgent. In other words, there seems to be something special about large classes which, in the opinion of teachers, does make life difficult for them.

And so we began to suspect that large classes are both a widespread phenomenon and an important one. But if this is the case, where is the ELT profession expressing its concern and involvement with this problem? It appears that the question of large classes is a question which is not normally addressed in TEFL training courses (at least in Britain), nor is it a concern in the current literature of ELT. Instead of being considered as a fact of pedagogic life, worthy of investigation in its own right, the phenomenon of large classes is, if anything, looked on as an aberration and is thus not treated as worthy of being researched.

Peter Hubbard, Director of the Language Research and Development Centre at the University of Guadalajara, Mexico, has made the following observation regarding the research-worthiness of language learning in large classes (personal communication) :

Jon Roberts from CALS, Reading University, commented during a recent visit that the large class phenomenon is not researched because most researchers react by saying : (a) it is not 'theoretically interesting' and (b) it is insoluble; the only solution is to avoid having large classes.

Both Jon and I would disagree with the first statement. The large class phenomenon is not simple, but complex. Almost certainly the etiology, operating conditions and

mode of operation of large classes vary widely. Attitudes towards them also vary. For example, it is well worth investigating the use of the term 'large classes' since some teachers appear to regard groups of more than 15 as 'large' and groups of over 20 as unteachable. Here in Mexico classes of 90 are not uncommon. This means there is a serious lack of communication. ...

The second statement is clearly unhelpful. The large class phenomenon is widespread and unlikely to go away. Turning our backs on it seems cowardly and dishonest. Nevertheless, Jon Roberts also warned against research that only yields greater frustration. The deciding factor here would be : How much freedom is there within a given system to make quite radical changes?

This apparent failure to address a problem which is of extreme importance to many teachers has had unfortunate repercussions. In Indonesia, for example, I felt that I could detect a strong feeling among colleagues who had returned from diploma- or masters-level training overseas that what they had been presented with during their time abroad had been interesting - but idealistic and not grounded in the realities of teaching life. Frequently, one heard colleagues who had recently returned to Indonesia after studying abroad say that although they admired the ideas concerning the teaching of EFL which were being promoted in overseas universities, there was no way in which most of those ideas could be implemented in their own contexts. Of course, it may be argued that these complaints were merely evidence of conservatism, of reluctance to experiment. Nevertheless, one cannot avoid having sympathy for these teachers. And once again, it was predominantly the question of large classes which teachers brought up when they discussed the

unreal idealism of the training which they had received in Britain, Australia or the United States.

If American, Australian and British institutions are perceived by many overseas teachers as offering courses which are not grounded in the difficult realities of classroom life - specifically, that these courses do not take into account the characteristics of large classes - how do externally-funded or externally-staffed ELT projects in situations where large classes are a factor respond to the phenomenon? Tony Crocker (personal communication) has made the following observations :

For writers like West, Gatenby, etc., the large class was an everyday *fact* of their working life demanding immediate practical solutions. This marks them off, it seems to me, from succeeding generations of 'theoretical applied linguists' for whom the specific facts of the implementational context within which an educational solution to a problem of language use or learning had to be effected were merely 'issues', primarily to be ignored when they ran counter to the prerequisites of their own particular theoretical orientations. ...

Most TEFL projects that I am familiar with invariably start from the premise of the 'difference' of EFL, and its subsequent need for smaller classes, longer hours, etc. Basically, that is implementational nonsense when the project is being set up in an institution whose stock-in-trade is a crowded timetable of one-to-many information-transfer/lecture type sessions, since from the beginning such an approach creates problems for decision makers/institutional managers rather than - which is the reason why the project was requested in the first place - providing solutions in a known problematic context. ...

The evidence, then, suggests that even in ELT projects in institutions or other contexts where large classes are an

important factor, it is this very feature of the situation which tends to be ignored.

To summarise : the personal experience of several members of the Group and other anecdotal evidence together suggested that the phenomenon of large classes is widespread. The same evidence suggested that large classes are of particular concern to the teachers who have to work with them. Furthermore, it appeared that little theoretical attention has been given to the question of language learning and teaching in large classes. Because EFL teacher training programmes are not generally concerned with language teaching in difficult circumstances, there seems to be a tendency for participants in training courses to view these courses as unrealistic. And finally, there is evidence that ELT development projects fail to take into consideration the existence of large classes.

These, then, are the five principal reasons underlying the Group's decision to investigate the question of language learning and teaching in large classes. This is not meant to imply that we believe that we are going to be able to solve these five problems. The point is simply that we find these to be sufficient arguments to justify paying serious attention to the phenomenon.

3 Project Activities

The Lancaster-Leeds Language Learning in Large Classes Research Project has four major activities : creating a bibliography, networking, organising colloquia, and promoting and undertaking research. The four activities feed into each other.

3.1 Creating a bibliography

The first version of the bibliography on large classes, containing only a handful of items, appeared in 1987. Since then, it has been revised and expanded on frequent occasions, and the eleventh version now appears as Project Report No. 1 (1989). Our original impression that the literature had almost nothing to offer on the question of large classes has not, therefore, been confirmed. It is expected that further revision and expansion will be required in the future.

The Introduction to Project Report No. 1 discusses various aspects of the bibliography in some detail. Nevertheless, it may be worth repeating and emphasising one particular characteristic of the way in which the bibliography has developed. It has been discovered that many of the items dealing with large classes are not to be found in the most easily accessible sources, such as the well-known international journals which serve the field of ELT. Instead, many of the most interesting and potentially most

useful materials appear in two types of publication which are relatively difficult to track down. The first of these is teachers' association newsletters and journals which have a limited geographical distribution. The second is books and journals which cater for educators in fields other than ELT.

Very often, we have had our attention drawn to materials in these two categories by colleagues in other parts of the world or in other disciplines. Indeed, the bibliography will continue to grow only if this process continues. We would therefore make an appeal to colleagues to keep us informed of any items which do not appear in the current version of the bibliography.

3.2 Networking

Another major activity of the Research Project has been to identify institutions - anywhere in the world - where large classes are a fact of life, and to make contact with individuals who are concerned about language learning and teaching in large classes. When this process began in early 1987, we assumed that it would be difficult to make such contacts. In the event, it has been extraordinarily easy and the response has been overwhelming. Our mailing list now has approximately 900 names in nearly thirty countries and is expanding rapidly. Colleagues with an interest in or experience in large classes are very welcome to add their names to the list.

Between 1987 and 1989 our closest links have been with institutions and individuals in Côte d'Ivoire, India, Indonesia, Japan, Mexico, Nigeria, Sénégal and the United States. But we are still extremely interested in setting up new links with any other interested individuals or organisations.

For various reasons, the majority of our links so far have been with colleagues working at the tertiary level. To some extent, we have also succeeded in making contact with teachers in secondary institutions (particularly in francophone Africa). But - with the exception of Linda Peachey's work (Project Report No. 8) - we have not been particularly successful in establishing links with teachers in primary or elementary schools; this represents an area where our networking activity needs to be strengthened.

3.3 Organising colloquia

The Research Project's third activity has been to organise opportunities for researchers and teachers who are concerned with large classes to come together, to share their work with each other, and to give this work wider exposure. So far, four such events have been arranged, at TESOL 1988, at IATEFL 1988, at TESOL 1989, and at IATEFL 1989. It is envisaged that similar meetings will continue to be organised in the future.

A Colloquium, 'Language Learning in Large Classes : Current Research', was organised as part of the 1988 TESOL Convention in Chicago, Illinois. The contributors to the Colloquium are listed in the Appendix. All of these contributors had been working closely with the Research Project and had been making use of research instruments developed by the Project. The Colloquium was, then, a report on the ongoing work of the Lancaster-Leeds Project.

Five of the papers presented during the Chicago Colloquium have now appeared as Project Reports. Allwright's is Project Report No. 3, Coleman's is project Report No. 4, LoCastro's is Report No. 5, McLeod's is Report No. 7, and Sabandar's is Report No. 9.

The second event was a poster session organised at the April 1988 Joint Annual Conference of IATEFL and TESOL Scotland at the University of Edinburgh. The poster session, 'Language Learning and Teaching in Large Classes', presented the findings of the Research Project in a format which provided an opportunity for detailed discussions between the Project coordinators and others interest in our work.

A further Colloquium was organised as part of the 1989 TESOL Convention in San Antonio, Texas. The theme of the Colloquium was 'Language Learning in Large Classes : Research Update' and there were six contributors. Details are given in the Appendix.

Whereas all the contributors to the 1988 Colloquium in Chicago had been employing procedures and instruments developed by the Research Project, the 1989 San Antonio Colloquium presented a wider range of papers. Some of the contributors (e.g. LoCastro and Ramani) had started to move away from the Research Project's standard instruments and reported their independent investigations. Indeed, one of the contributors (Bolton) had not formerly been associated with the Lancaster-Leeds Research Project at all and was invited to present an outside perspective.

Coleman's contribution to the San Antonio Colloquium is available as a Project Report (No. 11). It is likely that other papers from this meeting will become available in the Project Reports series in due course.

A further opportunity to present the work of the Research Project was provided by the 1989 IATEFL Conference at the University of Warwick. A panel discussion, 'Language Learning in Large Classes', was organised. There were five participants, all of whom were closely associated with the Research Project. Details are given in the Appendix. Three of these papers have been issued in the Project Reports series : Allwright's is Project Report No. 12, Coleman's is Report No. 11, and Sarangi's is Report No. 10. It is likely that other papers from this panel discussion will also appear in the Project Report series in the future. A poster session, 'Language Learning in Large Classes :

Current Issues' was also organised during the 1989 IATEFL Conference, complementing the panel discussion.

3.4 Promoting and undertaking research

In addition to the creation of a bibliography, creating a network of contacts, and organising colloquia, the fourth major activity of the Research Project has been the encouragement of research, the performance of research, and the dissemination of research findings.

Our first step was to identify a set of research questions. This was done very early in the history of the Project. Although the questions have been modified, expanded and clarified since then, essentially there has been consensus since the beginning of the Project as to the areas which require investigation. These questions are discussed in detail in Section 4 below.

The research process so far has been dominated by the trialling and use of two questionnaires, the first of which investigates teachers' perceptions of class size and the second of which looks at teachers' perceptions of the difficulties involved in teaching large classes. Several of the Project Reports discuss one or both of these questionnaires.

Wherever possible, questionnaires are administered to *groups* of respondents rather than to isolated individuals. We have tended to invite the cooperation of colleagues, course participants, and others with whom we have professional contact, to help with the distribution and administration of the questionnaires. As was noted earlier, this has led to a certain imbalance in the constitution of the population which has been tapped, with a preponderance of tertiary level teachers among our respondents.

Once the data has been collected, three possibilities are available for the analysis of responses. Firstly, the coordinators or other core members of the Research Project may be able to analyse responses; this is the procedure which has led to the creation of Project Reports 4, 6, 7 and 10. Secondly, the material may be processed by research or masters students at Leeds or Lancaster; this procedure led to the writing of Project Report No. 8 and to Mahmoud's paper for the 1989 IATEFL panel discussion. Thirdly, colleagues who are working in the institutions where the research instruments have been administered may analyse them in situ. This is how Project Reports 5 and 9 came to be written, as well as the contributions of Hubbard and Ramani to the 1988 and 1989 TESOL Colloquia.

Wherever possible, we try to encourage those who wish to cooperate with us to adopt the third of these routes. There are, of course, some potential disadvantages in this approach. When

data analysts are working in places as far apart as Japan and Mexico, for example, it is extremely difficult - if not impossible - to ensure that decisions are made in a systematic and standardised way (decisions concerning the eligibility of data, for instance, or the classification of responses).

Nevertheless, the advantages of adopting a decentralised approach outweigh the disadvantages. For a start, the amount of data now available is simply more than can be managed in Lancaster and Leeds, even making use of masters and research students and their spouses. Secondly, when data drawn from a particular context is analysed by a teacher who himself or herself is working in that context, that teacher possesses local information and background knowledge which is simply not available to an outside analyst. This means that the local analyst is in a position to interpret findings in a much more insightful way. Thirdly, when similar research instruments are used by a variety of researchers in many different contexts it is likely that a very wide range of possible improvements to the instruments will be suggested. Similarly, it is likely that a range of insights and of possible interpretations of results is likely to become available. These different insights must then be shared among all those who are involved in the research.

In other words, we feel that the richness which results from a decentralised procedure outweighs the risk of a lack of consistency. Entrusting data analysis to teacher-researchers is

ultimately more fruitful than making use of teachers merely as data collectors.

The dissemination of research findings constitutes the third step in this activity. This, of course, is the role of the Project Reports, and also of the colloquia which have been described in Section 3.3 above. Even as the first twelve Project Reports are published in the autumn of 1989, we are gathering together a second batch of reports which may be available for publication in 1990, although a decision on this will depend on the availability of funding. Future Project Reports may include descriptions by Coleman of observations in large classes in secondary schools in Sénégal and Côte d'Ivoire; an analysis of learner behaviour in large classes in Japan by LoCastro; a consideration of ethnographic approaches to the study of large classes in South India by Ramani; an attempt by Mahmoud - making use of data from Nigeria - to develop a classification system for teachers' responses to our questionnaire about their current practice in large classes; an analysis by Coleman of the perceptions of a group of primary teachers of large classes in Sabah, Malaysia; a report by Hubbard of work in large classes in Mexican universities; a discussion by Coleman of the pedagogical implications of the findings of large classes research; and others.

3.5 Summary of activities

The creation of a bibliography, the establishment of a network of concerned colleagues, the organisation of meetings, and the promotion, performance and dissemination of research constitute the four major activities of the Large Classes Research Project. It will have been noticed that these four activities overlap with and crucially influence each other.

In addition to these four principal activities, there is another type of activity which involves those associated with the Research Project, even though, strictly speaking, it is not a Project activity. Members of the Project are sometimes invited to talk to and to work with groups of teachers of large classes. For example, Coleman was involved in a workshop on language teaching in large classes at Bayero University, Nigeria, in September 1987. He also contributed to a national seminar on large classes in Sénégal in November 1988. And in 1989 he visited Côte d'Ivoire twice, firstly to observe large classes in secondary schools and secondly to run a national workshop on large classes at the secondary level.

Opportunities such as these are of immense importance to the Project in several ways. They enable us to expand the network of teachers and administrators who are concerned about large classes; they frequently provide new items for the bibliography; they enable us to collect new data (questionnaire responses,

classroom observations, etc) and to encourage local research initiatives. And, importantly, they constitute opportunities to offer to teachers for discussion and appraisal the pedagogical ideas which we have been tentatively developing in response to the findings of the ongoing research programme. This process is discussed in greater detail in Section 5 below.

4 Research Questions

This section lists the nine major areas which the Research Project has set as its long-term agenda for investigation. Work is well-advanced in some of these areas and it has begun in others, but some of the areas remain completely untouched. They are not, therefore, *consecutive*, in such a way that work in one area has to be delayed until work in another area has been completed. Instead, these major research topics can be thought of as nine *parallel* tracks, with progress which just happens to be more advanced along some of these tracks than others. One outcome of this approach has been that some members of the Project have chosen to concentrate on certain areas, whilst other members have concentrated on different areas. Findings from one area of investigation then feed into the work which is being done in neighbouring areas.

4.1 Teachers' concern with large classes

At a very early stage in our discussions, we felt that we needed to confirm the anecdotal evidence that teachers are actually concerned about large classes and that large classes are seen by the majority of teachers in negative terms. This was done through a very small scale investigation which is discussed in the first part of Project Report No. 4. However, more recently, Peachey (Project Report No. 8) and others have questioned these early findings. It may be that our later research instruments are insufficiently neutral and take too much for granted the idea that teachers necessarily find large classes to be difficult. More investigation is required in this area.

4.2 The extent of the phenomenon

This area has two aspects. (a) Just how 'large' are large classes? We suspected that there would be considerable variation from country to country and possibly also from one type of institution to another. (b) Where and in what circumstances are large classes to be found? Both of these questions have been intensively investigated and are reported in Project Reports 4, 5, 6 and 8. Much more work needs to be done at all levels and in all parts of the world, but there are particularly glaring gaps in three different types of situation : in primary-level

institutions, in situations where teachers face extremely large classes (200 and above), and in South America.

4.3 Reasons for the occurrence of large classes

Can the phenomenon of large classes be explained simply through economic factors (such as a shortage of teaching staff)? Do administrative attitudes have a role to play here? Are there 'ecological' explanations for large classes? Some sort of ethnographic research will probably be required to answer some of these questions.

It is becoming increasingly evident that the causes of large classes are, in many situations, extremely complex. In the case of the Indonesian situation with which I am familiar, for example, staff shortages provided only part of the explanation for the fact that classes were so large. It seemed that however many new teachers were recruited - ostensibly with the purpose of reducing class size - the classes continued to be very big. Somehow bureaucratic decisions were being taken which continued to make large classes for language teaching an inevitability. How was it that those decisions came to be taken?

LoCastro (Project Report No. 5) pays some attention to this question and identifies bureaucratic and historical explanations for the existence of large classes in Japan. Peachey (Project

Report No. 8) also discusses the question briefly and suggests that, although teacher shortages go some way to explaining the occurrence of large classes in the black primary school system in South Africa, government policies actually encourage the formation of large classes.

More recently, a group of teachers from various Asian and African countries who were participating in in-service courses at Leeds provided a very rich set of data concerning the occurrence of large classes in their respective home countries. This data has yet to be analysed, but at first sight it would appear to indicate that the reasons may be very complex indeed, that in some cases they are quite unexpected, and that they are locally specific.

4.4 Attitudes to large classes

This area encompasses four closely related questions. (a) At what point do teachers perceive classes to be large? (b) At what point do learners perceive classes to be large? (c) What are the opinions of teachers with regard to large classes? (d) What are the opinions of learners regarding large classes?

The first and third of these questions have been intensively investigated and are reported in Project Reports 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10. But more work still needs to be done and, as was

suggested in Section 4.2 above, there are particular gaps in the data from primary/elementary schools, from situations where classes are very large indeed (200 and above), and from South America.

The second and fourth of the four questions listed above - concerning learners' responses to large classes - have received relatively little attention so far, except in LoCastro's work (Project Report No. 5).

4.5 Data collection in large classes

What sorts of data should we be looking for in large classes? How can this data be gathered? What special difficulties are there with regard to data collection in large classes? How can large classes be described convincingly to other people? What cultural constraints on observation and data collection apply in different situations?

There are at least two problems here which are probably distinctive to large classes. The first concerns the actual process of collecting data. Van Lier's confident recommendation, for example, is unlikely to be applicable in most of the large class situations with which we have contact (1988:240) :

... any cassette recorder can be used to record from the middle of the room. ... In addition, two recorders can be used in one large class, so that one recording can be checked with another. Some recorders

have sockets for extension microphones, and these can be helpful when recording group work. I often use small lavalier microphones which can be clipped to a person's clothing or to the cover of a notepad in front of two or three learners.

The second problem is that even if we were able to collect data in large classes, we still lack convenient and recognised methods for presenting our findings so that they are meaningful to readers. In the course of an attempt to describe the introduction of interactive tasks into large classes in Indonesia, Coleman (1987a:132) makes the following complaint :

... what we are talking about here is a string of processes, a series of interactions sometimes involving large numbers of people. Unfortunately, this discussion cannot always be carried out in writing in as straightforward a manner as one would wish. Reports of even the most exhilarating and highly interactive of tasks can sometimes be unwieldy. The problem is that we have not yet developed the machinery which would allow us to describe this type of interaction in a translucent way. In other words, we still lack accessible conventions for a choreography of tasking.

Coleman's difficulty arose in the course of a description of an innovation in teaching methodology, but exactly the same difficulty faces the researcher who is simply trying to describe what happens when a very large number of people come together in one room.

With two minor exceptions, no work has been done in this area. The first of these attempts to come to terms with the difficulty of observing and describing large classes took place a few years ago, at Hasanuddin University in Indonesia. In

cooperation with a group of pre-service teacher trainees, I experimented with a sampling procedure for the observation of large classes. Two observers at a time would observe a class of between 50 and 100 students. Each observer would then focus his or her attention on one individual student for the duration of the session (without informing the student concerned). By the end of the session, we would have two detailed records of what two different students had been doing, how often they had initiated talk with other students, how often other students had initiated talk with them, how often they had responded to the teacher's instructions, how often they had initiated interaction with the teacher, and so on. Clearly, there are problems with this procedure, particularly in the initial step of choosing the learners who are to be observed, and in the conclusions which can legitimately be drawn from such a small sample.

A second possibility which we have considered is to look at the data-collecting procedures which are used by social scientists when studying crowd behaviour, to see whether they have developed techniques which are adaptable for large classes. Some work has been done in this area by Worku (1988), but the results so far are inconclusive.

4.6 The performance of large classes

This area of research encompasses a series of questions which consider the large class lesson as a social occurrence. The questions include the following. What is it that actually goes on in large classes? Are there 'universals' of classroom behaviour in large classes? Is it always the case - as Coleman (1987b) suggested with regard to English language classes in Indonesian universities - that there are parallels with audience behaviour or other social phenomena outside the classroom? What other things happen in large classes apart from the language learning and teaching which are the explicit objectives of the event? What socializing effects do large classes have? What are the similarities and differences between smaller and larger classes?

Almost certainly, these questions can be tackled only when the problems of data collection and description (Section 4.5 above) have been satisfactorily solved. Consequently, very little work has been done in this area so far. However, it is hoped that future Project Reports will include both descriptive and explanatory accounts of large classes in secondary schools in Sénégal and Côte d'Ivoire.

4.7 Strategies in large classes

Whereas the questions listed in Section 4.6 derive from a perception of the lesson in a large class as a social event, a different set of questions arises if we concentrate instead on the individual participants in the events and the decisions which they make regarding their roles in and contributions to those events. Do teachers modify their behaviour in large classes? If so, in what ways? And if so, to what extent are these modifications made consciously? What strategies do learners faced with learning in large classes adopt? This is an extremely important but relatively unexplored area, although Allwright (Project Reports 3 and 12) has begun to pay attention to the issues here.

4.8 Language acquisition in large classes

Even when we have decided how to collect data in large classes, even after we have collected that data, and even when we have a reasonably clear idea of what teachers and learners do in large classes, we are still left with some very difficult questions. Is a second or foreign language ever learnt in large classes? If so, how? And to what extent? Is language acquisition in large classes actually any different from language acquisition in smaller classes? Do learners in large classes learn more quickly or more slowly than those in smaller classes? Are they learning

things which are different from those things which are learnt by learners in smaller classes? Are they learning in ways which are different from the ways in which people learn when they are in smaller classes? Allwright has considered some of these questions in his two reports (Project Reports 3 and 12), but no other work has yet been done in this area.

4.9 Experiments in large classes

The final area which we have demarcated so far concerns the innovative work which is being carried out with large classes. What attempts have been made by teachers, by course organisers and by administrators to overcome the problem of large classes or to come to terms with it? What are the advantages of large classes? Can large classes be avoided? Can successful attempts to deal with large classes be applied in other situations? Are solutions transferable cross-culturally? How can these experiments be evaluated?

Coleman's survey of approaches to the management of large classes (Project Report No. 11), which is based on the bibliography (Project Report No. 1), is an attempt to bring together various descriptions and to classify them. Doubtless, this account is incomplete and will require modification as we become aware of other innovations and experiments.

5 Conclusions

Nine areas of research have been identified and discussed in Section 4. However, the list is almost certainly still incomplete and requires constant updating and revision.

It will have been observed that the nine areas were presented in an approximate order which moves from the demographic, through the ethnographic, to the experimental; that is to say, from description through analysis to application. Nevertheless, as was emphasised at the beginning of Section 4, this is not intended to imply that we believe that the questions have to be worked through in a linear way. With only a few exceptions, it should be possible for different researchers to be working on parallel areas of concern at the same time.

Whilst we have deliberately adopted what might be called a synchronic approach towards the investigation of these different aspects of language learning in large classes, we have had to resist pressures upon us for a similar 'synchronicity' in the provision of 'solutions' to the problems of large classes. Simply by declaring an interest in and a desire to investigate language learning in large classes, we have perhaps given the impression that we *already* have available a reliable set of answers to teachers' difficulties.

This is a delicate issue. On the one hand, we are conscious of the danger - highlighted by Jon Roberts (Section 2 above) - of unfairly raising expectations and so of frustrating teachers. On the other hand, we wish to avoid the danger which Nunan has warned us of when he complains about a 'general lack of systematic study of classroom learning and ... classroom-centred research' (1988:74) :

[Language teaching has been] at the mercy of numerous applied linguists who have foisted their frequently untested or inadequately tested theories on the profession. This has led to a number of undesirable outcomes. Instead of a cautious programme of research and development, the profession has been characterised by a series of fads and fashions.

It would be very easy to rush into publishing 'solutions' to the problems of language classes. The bibliography (Project Report No. 1) shows that this has often been done already. But the validity of our 'solutions' would be spurious, because they would be founded on research which is still relatively fragmented and tentative.

At the same time, we do have to consider the pedagogical implications of our findings, and we do need to offer such implications to teachers and to try them out. We have been fortunate that there have been several such opportunities (see Section 3.5 above), and other opportunities arise when teachers come to Lancaster and to Leeds. (Leeds now has a diploma option course in Language Learning in Large Classes, for example.)

The solution to this predicament is threefold.

Firstly, as has been emphasised throughout this discussion, the research work is itself being carried out in a decentralised way. Much of it is actually being performed by classroom teachers and course organisers. In this way, the research is coloured by the needs and perceptions of people who work with large classes.

Secondly, we suspect that if there are 'solutions' to large classes, then the people most likely to have developed such solutions are large class teachers themselves. One function which the Research Project can usefully perform is to disseminate the results of local experiments in large classes, through the bibliography and through other reports (Section 4.9 above).

Thirdly, when we are invited to talk to teachers about our work, it is incumbent upon us to make clear the tentative nature of our findings, to invite teachers to consider whether there are parallels between our findings and their own situations (i.e. to investigate their own situations), and then to encourage them to develop for themselves pedagogical solutions to the difficulties which they have identified. The Research Project in this way has the dual roles of catalyst and model. New or modified classroom procedures which teachers come to by following this route are much more likely to have local validity - and are more likely to be implemented - than are imposed solutions or solutions which in their entirety derive from alien situations.

At this point, it remains only to be said that it would have been quite impossible to achieve those results which have been achieved so far without the cooperation of colleagues in many different parts of the world. In order to refine the work which has already been done, and in order to move on to the investigation of new areas, we will continue to need to call upon that cooperation.

Note

- 1 Srikant Sarangi suggested that I write this Project Report. It is a modified, updated and considerably expanded version of the first part of the first report issued by the Lancaster-Leeds Language Learning in Large Classes Research Project in 1987. The main part of that earlier report has also been revised and now forms Project Report No. 4.

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Appendix

- 1 Papers presented in the Colloquium, 'Language Learning in Large Classes : Current Research'; TESOL Convention, Chicago, Illinois, 1988 :

Dick Allwright, University of Lancaster, U.K.

An overview of language learning in large classes

Hywel Coleman, University of Leeds, U.K.

The largeness of large classes

Peter Hubbard, Guadalajara University, Mexico

Language learning in large classes in Mexico

Virginia LoCastro, Tsukuba University, Japan

Language learning in large classes in Japan

Nicki McLeod, University of Lancaster, U.K.

What teachers cannot do in large classes

Jacob Sabandar, Universitas '45, Indonesia

Language learning in large classes in Indonesia.

- 2 Papers presented in the Colloquium, 'Language Learning in Large Classes : Research Update'; TESOL Convention, San Antonio, Texas, 1989 :

Dick Allwright

Methodological issues in research on large classes

John Bolton, Montgomery College, U.S.A.

Large classes : an American perspective

Hywel Coleman

Approaches to the management of large classes

Peter Hubbard, Guadalajara University, Mexico

Teaching English to large classes in the University of Guadalajara High School System, Mexico

Virginia LoCastro, Tsukuba University, Japan

Interaction patterns in large classes (Japan)

Esther Ramani, Indian Institute of Science, India

Qualitative approaches to research in large classes (India).

- 3 Papers presented in the Panel Discussion, 'Language Learning in Large Classes'; IATEFL Conference, University of Warwick, 1989 :

Dick Allwright

How important are lessons, anyway?

Hywel Coleman

Approaches to the management of large classes

Nicki McLeod, University of Lancaster, U.K.

Large classes in Malaysia : what do we want to know about them?

Al-Hafiz Mahmoud, University of Leeds, U.K.

What teachers claim to do in large classes

Usha Sarangi, University of Lancaster, U.K.

A consideration of methodological issues in analysing the problems language teachers experience in large classes.

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Project Reports

- 1 Hywel Coleman. *Learning and Teaching in Large Classes : A Bibliography.* 1989.
ISBN 1 872351 00 X.
- 2 Hywel Coleman. *The Study of Large Classes.* 1989.
ISBN 1 872351 01 8.
- 3 Dick Allwright. *Is Class Size a Problem?* 1989.
ISBN 1 872351 02 6.
- 4 Hywel Coleman. *How Large Are Large Classes?* 1989.
ISBN 1 872351 03 4.
- 5 Virginia LoCastro. *Large Size Classes : The Situation in Japan.* 1989.
ISBN 1 872351 04 2.
- 6 Hywel Coleman. *Large Classes in Nigeria.* 1989.
ISBN 1 872351 05 0.
- 7 Nicki McLeod. *What Teachers Cannot Do in Large Classes.* 1989.
ISBN 1 872351 06 9.
- 8 Linda Peachey. *Language Learning in Large Classes : A Pilot Study of South African Data.* 1989.
ISBN 1 872351 07 7.
- 9 Jacob Sabandar. *Language Learning in Large Classes in Indonesia.* 1989.
ISBN 1 872351 08 5.
- 10 Usha Sarangi. *A Consideration of Methodological Issues in Analysing the Problems of Language Teachers in Large Classes.* 1989.
ISBN 1 872351 09 3.
- 11 Hywel Coleman. *Approaches to the Management of Large Classes.* 1989.
ISBN 1 872351 10 7.
- 12 Dick Allwright. *How Important Are Lessons, Anyway?* 1989.
ISBN 1 872351 11 5.

Further Project Reports are in preparation.

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